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Here, Thinking

Nicolas Ocean Shannon
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Here, Thinking

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

Nicolas Ocean Shannon

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Acknowledgments

I write with love,
to my parents, Caty and Tom,
my brothers, Louis and Jack.

To my housemates
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and Rali, who is new!

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For Alexandra Baro

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Prologue: What are we Doing?

Reading *The Human Condition* means searching for the stories that Hannah Arendt threads through it. On the part of the reader, this search requires efforts in re-description and re-telling—finding one's own path to follow Arendt as she writes. These efforts are made possible by the intricate theoretical and historical picture of our shared condition—or *vita activa*—that Arendt illustrates through her book. Setting off from this picture, I will try to retell the story I've found during my brief time with the book. This story departs from a theoretical view of the book in search of its poetic elements. But to make this departure I will take a moment to describe, however partially, the wide arc of relationships gathered together in the book, beginning in the most abstract possibilities and broadening towards the actual appearances of these possibilities.

To begin, human beings have certain inherent capacities. We can use things, make things, and can communicate and exchange with each other. We also have capacities for thought, cognition, and logical reasoning. These capacities correspond to particular activities that fall into three distinct modes: labor, work and action. Each of these activities relate to a particular kind of space. Labor is all that we do to survive. We consume and expend energy to find food, to eat, sleep, fight, etc. Our labors take place on and bind us to the Earth. They are necessitated by the fact that as mortals fated to live and die, we ultimately follow the same cyclical laws as everything else that grows from nature. Work allows us to build a manmade world over the Earth, transforming its raw material into a home for humans beings to spend their lives. The world is built and populated with things that may endure the forces of nature. No thing can endure forever, but in concert they last long enough to give a sense of tangible continuity to the

generations that pass through the world. Among other things, workers make tools, design dwellings, form constitutions. Artists are workers too, but the objects they make stand out from others due to their inherent fragility, uselessness, and remarkable endurance. The significance and peculiarity of works of art in *The Human Condition* lies at the center of our story. Finally, the capacity for action, which always occurs as speech and action, that produce the momentary appearance of words and deeds in which someone discloses who they are—namely, the person who chose to act. All actions fall into the intangible and ever-rewoven *web of human relationships* that Arendt sometimes describes as overlaid, and sometimes as overgrowing, the world.

The combined actualization of these capacities conveys dynamic articulations of the relationship between private and public life. For Arendt, this relationship occurs in different forms at several distinct scales. For example, she discusses the physical barrier between private and communal spaces; the difference between private relationships between lovers and families, and public relationships between friends, societies, and political bodies. She also attributes privacy or publicity to particular activities. Arendt relates these tangible manifestations of the relationship to intangible privacy of the mind, of inner feelings and thoughts which she opposes to the publicity of appearance in the world. These articulations change over time. Both what we do and how we understand what we do alter how we understand our location between public and private life. This in turn changes how we labor, work, and act, and thus how we understand our place ourselves on Earth, in the World, in constant relationship to others.

Through her book, Arendt draws and redraws the different “constellations within the hierarchy of activities as we know them from western history” (6). How all of these elements

relate to one another at any given moment—sometimes illuminating and other times covering each other over—shows us a different facet of a condition we share with others not only present across lands and seas, but in time past and future.

Before we draw out our own stories from the book, we should recognize the two ‘stories’ Arendt announces at the end of the book’s prologue. The book will tell its first story through an analysis of the “general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent” (6). She will develop her picture of the human condition by looking at the changes between historical articulations of the relationship between the labor-work-action triad and public and private life. The second story tells us of the roots of “modern world alienation,” a situation of disorientation and worldlessness. spoken and unspoken, that manifests in the Modern World. She traces the roots of this situation through a story of the scientific and intellectual developments of the “Modern Age,” which began with Galileo’s telescope in the 17th and culminated in the early 20th century with the appearance of quantum physics. This age precipitated the present “Modern World,” which “was born with the first atomic explosions” (6).

Arendt declares two important systematic omissions from her stories. From the first story she excludes, broadly, discussion of the activity of thinking, “the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable” (5). She reasons that traditionally and currently thinking has not been considered “within the range of every human being” (5). in the same way that labor, work, and action have been. From the second story, she excludes a picture of the Modern World even though it is the era within which she writes. Her reason is simply that we cannot do justice to a story before it has run its course. The second story confines itself to understanding “how society developed and presented itself at the very moment it was overcome by the advent of a

new and yet unknown age” (6). The Modern Age began and ended in a rupture, so that previous understanding’s of the human condition hardly seem to describe modern life. The goal of the book is not to define and fix our situation, but to develop ways of reflecting on that situation as it unfolds. Through the second story she wants to ask how we once responded to moments where our sense of reality shattered, and what we can learn from those moments as we face an uncertain future. How can we make sure that we’ll tell a meaningful story when the time to comes?

Together, these omissions begin a third story, and a third way of telling a story about the human condition. This is the story of the book, *The Human Condition*, of its place in the world, between its author and readers. This story begins as Arendt’s two omissions seem to fall into tension with the central theme and guiding proposition of the book. The theme is “what we are doing” and her proposition “to think what we are doing” (5). How can we know how to “think what we are doing” if we avoid discussing thinking and the Modern World, where we are presently doing? And yet, again:

“What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.” (HC 5)

Making sense of this tension between Arendt’s intention and her systematic method requires a different perspective from which to read her writing. Rather than understand her proposition as a general maxim, I would like to take this statement as a description of what Arendt intended to do in her writing and what she will ask us to do in our reading. By way of the book, we are going to think along with Arendt as she herself attempts to think what we are doing. This literal-minded interpretation may seem peculiar. Through it I mean to place Arendt’s proposition in the context of her own ideas. When we read any scholarly work, we generally

understand that our task is to carefully comprehend the author's argument, or his or her point of view, so we can form a proper opinion about it. This kind of formal comprehension is not, at least not primarily, the recommended goal for approaching the *The Human Condition*. We will be *thinking* with the book and that will lead to a different sort of understanding. For Arendt, thinking and cognition are distinct and in many ways opposed mental processes: "Cognition always pursues a definite aim...once this aim is reached, the cognitive process has come to an end. Thought, on the contrary, has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results..."(170). The implication of this opposition in the guiding proposition of the book makes sense; understanding the differences between those mental processes, and how they blur in modern perceptions of thinking, is one of the permeating concerns of the book.

Her proposition to think indicates that Arendt wants us to read the book through our own shared context. We have to steer clear of the tendencies towards "thoughtlessness" symptomatic of the Modern World—"the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty" (5). These trivial "truths" subdue the pain of our situation because they answer it. The book will not give us answers. Answering implies that the problems of our human condition matter only until we solve them, and afterwards can be discarded and forgotten. The proposition asks us to read in the conviction that if we let ourselves *think* about these problems, then the human meaning they seem devoid of may appear to us. This rejection is not a withdrawal into a stone-faced stoicism. On the contrary, Arendt's reconsiderations transpire from "the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears" (5). The practice of thinking Arendt invites us to manifest when, we find ways to

articulate the perplexities of our common life as one possible “constellation” the human condition among the many other’s different eras have faced.

It is one thing to interpret this proposition, and another to actually follow through with it. For the reader, the general conundrum is that thinking, at least in an Arendtian sense, implies a mental activity withdrawn from external activities like reading. The goal of this project is to understand what it means to think what we are doing as we are reading. I will propose that Arendt invites us to imagine the possibility that we can bring the way we think to the way we read. She does this by finding ways to show her own thinking in her writing. So while the book is a rich collection theoretically related ideas, it also shows its readers the ways she arrived at those ideas.

Introduction

Having glanced at *The Human Condition*’s very first pages, I would like to jump to the book’s final paragraphs, where Arendt reconsiders thought’s place in the Modern World. Thought, she tells us, may well be the most important activity of all. Though the fate of thinking has perhaps grown “irrelevant for the future of the world,” a world evermore unrecognizably reworked by scientific and technological artifice, “it is not irrelevant for the future of man” (HC 324)., who will necessarily have to face that world. Thinking is both the most vulnerable of all human capacities and the one that in “the extent of sheer activity” (325). may surpass all others as the activity wherein we do the most. How we care for its vulnerability may very well determine the fate of human freedom. This final return to the subject of thought resounds and reminds us of Arendt’s initial proposition to think what we are doing. It tells us clearly, thinking

about the world does not end with the close of the book, the comprehension of its theories and the ability to summarize it. If we found in our reading some moment to think, we should bring that moment to the rest of our lives. But with the book ending on this note, we may very well ask how we can go about doing this. The answer doesn't seem obvious. Besides, as Arendt reminds us in these last pages, thought was explicitly omitted from the book's considerations.

Having heard the omission of thought from the beginning of the book in the appeal to it at the end, I want to lead us back around to the very center of the book—to Chapter 23 of 45, “The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art”, where strangely, Arendt does describe the activity of thinking. In this last chapter of the “Work” section, immediately before the section on “Action”, Arendt describes how works of art stand out from other objects due to their uselessness, durability, and ‘transfigurative’ fabrication process. These aspects make works of art exceptionally reflective of human life. Not because artworks sometimes picture human beings, but because they most clearly convey their immediate source in human thought. Arendt not only describes thinking in relationship to works of art, but in distinction to other mental capacities such as cognition and logical reasoning. Why does thought—previously omitted—emerge in her writing at this juncture, the very center of the book, in a discussion of the work of art? To answer this question, we have to rethink how we are reading *The Human Condition*.

The prologue, Chapter 23, and the conclusion of the book make up three connected moments where Arendt is concerned with thinking's place in her book. These three moments are all the more conspicuous because the bulk of the book does not consider thinking. That said, the book is a product of thinking and as we saw, asks us to think. That being the case, we should in the course of our reading try to imagine what Arendt was doing when she was writing.

Presumably, she was trying to think what she was doing *as she was writing*. Our goal isn't to know what she was thinking, but rather to keep in mind that we are reading a particular person's attempt to do precisely what she asked us to do. We are reading a record of thought. Not a direct representation of a thought-process, but a thing that was made from a thoughtful care for the activity of thinking itself—and that seeks to make something out of that care. From this perspective, we can begin to read *The Human Condition* as though it were one of those peculiar objects it describes: a work of art. As such, we should begin to reread *The Human Condition* from its center in Chapter 23. I will show that through the chapter's description of works of art, Arendt takes a moment to show us what she has been doing as she has been writing her book: trying to make her thoughts appear in words. To understand how she shows this, we will need to find a way to look for the relationship between the way she writes, and what she writes about. Going on this way means moving away from a theoretical perspective of the text towards a poetic one. To make this move, we should start understanding a theoretical understanding of how and what Chapter 23 says and how it relates to the rest of the text.

In Section One, I will discuss Patchen Markell's interpretation of Chapter 23 in his essay, "Arendt's Work: The Architecture of the Human Condition" (2011). Afterwards, I will show how and why my interpretation of the chapter diverges from his. Markell's way of reading the tensions and contradictions of *The Human Condition* has informed my own inquiry, and his thoughtful and complex argument is a helpful parallel interpretation of the significance that the book's structure has for the book's subjects. Markell's analysis is interesting because he frames the book's structural and stylistic features as representations of its theoretical concerns. On his account, the book's tensions and contradictions serve to reinforce rather than weaken the theory

they attempt to describe because developments later in the book help reformulate the relationships that were drawn before them. Markell frames Chapter 23 as the most important structural member of the text, acting as a pivot where the book shifts between two contradictory modes of theoretical distinction.

In Section Two, I argue that Markell misses a chance to ask *why* the book's structure, tensions and all, "performs" the theory contained within it because he assumes that these performances always serve to bolster Arendt's theoretical considerations. By framing them as performances, his reading does work the book's tensions into a theoretical system. However, it is *his* system, not Arendt's. I show that for Arendt, theoretical and performative activities are in fact *literally* opposed. If we are going to say that Chapter 23 appears or *acts* in a certain way, than we must to take this opposition into account. If we do, we see that the chapter acts in an altogether strange and unsystematic manner; tangibly representing the work of art's relationship to the world.

In Section Three, I look to *The Life of The Mind* to better understand the relationship between theorist and performer, and see how this relationship may impact our reading of Chapter 23 and its relative opposition to the theoretical considerations of *The Human Condition*. Arendt represents the relationship between theoretical and performative perspectives through a contrast between theoretical and metaphorical language. *The Life of the mind* tells us that thinking appears in the world through metaphorical language. In this light of this later work, I argue that the the use of metaphorical language in Chapter 23 positions it as a tangible representation of thought's movement into appearance.

In Section Four, I identify Arendt's use of the term *transfiguration* in Chapter 23, as a particular metaphor through which she describes the *experience* of thought's movement into appearance. To understand her use of the term as metaphorical, I attempt a method Arendt makes use of in *The Life of the Mind* to uncover the meaning behind common philosophical terms—among them *theory* and *metaphor*—by “dissolving” them into their original context.

In Section Five, I continue my search for the presence and meaning of metaphorical language in Chapter 23 by considering Arendt's notion of the close relationship between poetry and thinking. Though she positions works of poetry as physical objects like any other artwork, she consistently uses metaphorical language that seems to conflict with her theoretical picture of how objects exist in the world. In showing this strain, Arendt tangibly represents poetry's inherent closeness to thinking, and its fey physical existence.

Finally, in Section Six I will jump to a different but no less illuminating genre of Arendt's work: biography. Just as we have been trying to think what Arendt is doing as a thinker writing, in her astonishing profile on the life of Walter Benjamin, Arendt shows her own attempt to think what another thinker was doing when they wrote. She does this by attempting to describe his unique kind of *poetic thinking*. I will argue that the peculiar way Arendt makes her attempt to think along with Benjamin serves as a model for our own endeavor to think along with her.

I. Complexity and contradiction in The Human Condition

Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers; in the work of the great authors they lead into the very center of their work.

*-Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition 104-105*

Patchen Markell's essay is concerned with Arendt's theory of work and the meaning of its placement between labor and action both in the layout of the book's sections and the theoretical scheme that those sections describe. Markell wants to say that these two features intertwine and reflect each other, so that "what is true of work in Arendt, in other words—that it cannot fully be understood in terms of the masterful production of a solid object according to a plan laid out in advance—is also true of Arendt's work" (PM 20). That is, Arendt situates the book as a worked object in the world it describes.

To show this, Markell's reading deviates from framing the text as a "snapshot of Arendt's theoretical position at a single moment in time" (20). Instead, he attempts to read the text as the "record" of its own making. Markell does this by reconsidering the text's puzzling tendency to contradict itself as it proceeds. Markell focuses on the contradictions that come about as Arendt shifts between different methods of distinguishing between her concepts. On his reading, the presence of these shifts tell us that Arendt allows her work to remain "deeply and visibly marked by the twists and turns her thinking followed" (20). Rather than try to decide between these tensions in method, he wants to ask why Arendt left these contradictions in her finished product, and how their introduction may reflect her theory.

From this processual standpoint, Markell argues that the “Work” section’s central placement in the scheme of the book reflects the concept of work’s centrality in Arendt’s theory. Further, he wants to say the converse: Arendt’s concept of work, along with its dynamic placement, is meant to represent the text as a piece of work in the world that it describes. Markell sees Chapter 23 as marking a turning point in Arendt’s own writing, where she shifts between two methods of theoretical distinction written in two different “tones.” This shift becomes necessary to maintain the labor-work-action triad as the relationships between them grow tenuous. Markell first identifies what he calls “territorial” distinctions. Before Chapter 23, work serves as a sort of buffer between labor and action. Arendt builds up this buffer through distinctions between labor and work. But as Arendt sees work becoming more like labor in appearance—and thereby imperiling action’s distinction—she has to find a different way to define work’s distinction from other activities. This comes both structurally and theoretically through the work of art, as it recasts work as a bridge, rather than a buffer. Whereas the distinctions between labor and work were “territorial” in tone, the distinctions between work and action become “relational.”

Markell’s position enters into a long debate between readers about how to systematize the *The Human Condition*’s various concepts and keywords. Markell points to ambiguities that arise from Arendt’s conflicting types of distinction. For example, how Arendt uses the concept of “location” to note spatial distinctions between private and public property seems to contradict how “location” distinguishes between the positions of labor, work, and action activities in the world. The relationship between these two senses becomes ambiguous because Arendt does not make it clear which sense of location outweighs the other. The debate centers around the

presence of such ambiguities in the text. Readers find it difficult to solve these ambiguities because the actual results of Arendt's distinctions are often left unclear. While she describes the defining qualities of labor, work, and action in detail, she rarely tells us what particular activities falls into these types. Arendt does not use one type of distinction to show the differences between two things more concretely than another. Given the lack of specific examples, readers find it difficult to see how one type of distinction is more concrete in a particular instance than another.

Markell sees the stakes of this debate in how we navigate the relationships between the labor, work, and action sections, which for him are the three central parts of the book. These sections form the text's central arc and end in a reconsideration of action, an activity historically impoverished of a serious theoretical treatment. Though Arendt may distinguish action from labor and work, it seems stripped bare: "It is famously difficult...to secure agreement about just what Arendtian action is, but she seems perfectly clear about what it is not" (PM 16).

I'll draw a quick picture of the confusion that a reader faces. For the most part, we can guess what activities fall under labor and work because they give tangible products that appear opposed: labor activities produce consumables necessary for us to survive, and work activities give us objects that endure nature. The products of action—speech and action—are ostensibly different. They are unlike products of labor because in the end they are not solely meant to keep us alive, but rather to show who we are and what we mean. Unlike products of work they do not endure nor are they reliable, because outside of their immediate appearance, their effects are uncertain. In this way, they are as fleeting and out of our hands as the consumables of labor. Just as a farmer is at the weather's whim, actors and witnesses are at the uncertain whims of what others will do or how they will respond. So acting has some qualitative and experiential affinity

to laboring. But doesn't acting also have an affinity to working? Both activities transcend necessity and both of their products are crafted from ideas. Action then seems to be a strange gelatinous mix of the qualities of labor and work and not a distinct activity.

The absence of a rigid system of distinction makes Arendt's account impractical for someone hoping to save fragile action from blurring into labor and work. Because readers have faith that this couldn't be the case, they try to explain which Arendt's distinctions operate in the system of Arendt's theory. Markell positions himself between two competing groups of readers: Those who read for "territorial" distinctions between labor, work, and action, and those who read for "conceptual" distinctions.¹

The territorial reader privileges Arendt's attempts to separate the three activities concretely, "each of which properly belongs to a separate domain, whose boundaries must be secured for the sake of resurrecting and preserving the especially fragile and valuable experience of action in particular" (16). The problem with territorial readings is that through them action appears to become irrelevant to the rest of human activity. If action only encompasses activities that transcend the realms of labor and work and enter into a realm of action and response, the category becomes practically unattainable to laborers and workers.

Other readers respond to this pitfall by trying to articulate Arendt's separation of activities conceptually rather than concretely. For these readers, the ambiguity of her particular distinctions between labor, work, and action means their distinctions are between "'attitudes' or 'ideal types' or useful 'abstractions'" (17). meant to bring out the overlaps of labor, work, and action as they can be found in any activity. While this view is tempting for Markell, it falters at

¹ To clarify, the opposition between "territorial" and "conceptual" distinctions is not the same as the relationship between "territorial" and "relational" distinctions, which Markell will argue is as operative to the book's structure.

two key points. First, these readings often discount parts of the text where Arendt's language is in fact very territorial. Second, these distinctions still read as territorial, now only replacing distinctions between concrete phenomena with distinctions between conceptual frameworks.

These two problems lead Markell to two questions that cannot be answered from either perspective. Both positions seem to discount evidence for the other by prioritizing either territorial or conceptual types of distinction, "but to do this is to miss the opportunity to ask about the significance of the coexistence, within a single text, of highly territorial formulations like these with others that cut against them" (PM 17). If we understand this kind of co-existence as an *intentional* element of the text, we can rethink the purpose of distinction itself, "whether the work performed by Arendt's distinctions is always and only the work of *separation*, of establishing and enforcing impassable boundaries between spaces—whether those spaces are literal or figurative, concretely social or merely conceptual" (18). The different ways Arendt takes to distinguish and relate her "spaces" are as important, and perhaps independent from, the spaces themselves.

With this in mind, Markell proposes a "radical" rereading of the structural organization of the book's three central chapters. He reframes the three not as a successive trio but as "the fraught conjunction of two different pairs of concepts—labor and work, and work and action" (18). The text conveys two different notions of work using two different "tones" of distinction. For Markell, the shift between these two notions of work anchors the text as a whole. When Arendt pairs work with labor, the relationship between them acts territorially to extricate and protect work from blurring into labor, even as it transgresses into the realm of action. But as the text proceeds to the "Action" section, the distinctions that Arendt describes become

“relational” to respect the importance of the world that work builds for the actions that take place within it.

Markell’s argument for the presence of this sort of shift, begins in a discussion of Section II of *The Human Condition*, “The Public and the Private Realm” Generally, every object (whether tangible or conceptual) spoken about in *The Human Condition* is said to have a particular location in the world in relation to other objects. These locations are a basic way for us separate one thing from another. The location of the “private” would be somewhere not in the “public” How we should treat this location is left ambiguous. Markell compares two opposing characterizations Arendt gives us of the ancient understanding of the private-public divide. First he points to Arendt’s focus on the “privation” of privacy as a territorial sense of its location: “the sense that to live a private life, a life without action or outside the *polis*, meant to be ‘deprived of something’ of the highest value” (25).² Here, what private life lacks compared to public life determines its relative location the public.

But he notices that the section shifts in tone as Arendt moves from discussing private and public activities to private and public property. As the divisions between the private and public become literally concrete, separated by walls, their respective locations distinguish them *relationally*. Arendt writes: “Originally, property meant no more or less than to have one’s location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic, that is, to be the head of one of the families which together constituted the public realm” (HC 61). The private becomes constitutional to the public because it makes stepping out into the *polis* possible: “A

² That is, Deprived of public appearance, and the chance to be remembered. Markell quotes from chapter 6 “The Rise of the Social”: “In ancient feeling the privative trait of privacy, indicated in the word itself, was all-important; it meant literally a state of being deprived of something, and even of the highest and most human of man’s capacities. A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human” (37).

location in this sense is an inner enclosure but it also has an exterior, publicly visible face, and the citizen who has a location regularly departs from it, indeed the function of that exterior,” of its defining walls, “is to connect the private *to* the public and so to make the departure and return possible" (PM 27). Here, the separate location of private dwellings allows for the possibility of public activities.

By showing the relationship between property and activity, Markell’s approach applies location’s relational distinction of public and private property to location’s territorial distinction of public and private activities. In particular, his reading opens up how we can interpret the “deprivation” of privacy. For example, we can reconsider the experience of this deprivation not only as a separation, but as a force that brings us to engage in public activities. Markell shows how this shift might impact our reading of another territorial instance of location when Arendt writes at the end of the section that “each human activity points to its proper location in the world" (HC 73). Here, particular activities “point” to their location not only relative to the private or public realms, but to their proper assignment in the categories of labor, work or action. Markell wants to show that the “relational” sense of location that preceded this second territorial sense, makes the nature of this “pointing” ambiguous: “these locations may serve as much to relate activities as to separate them, indeed even to facilitate movement across their boundaries" (27). That is, perhaps from the distinct point of view of doing one activity, we may see its relationship to other activities in other categories.

Markell rereads the purpose of territorial distinctions between activities through the relational distinctions that arises between physical spaces. He uses this rereading as a model for distinguishing between two senses of work present in the book. In his view, Arendt distinguishes

work territorially through the instrumental character of the fabrication process. In the 'Work' section Arendt tells us that this process begins with a collection of means that are organized, through planning and workmanship, for the production of a useful end. Quoting Arendt, Markell writes that "the activity of work has as its terminus *and* as its purpose a "piece of work," an independent entity that will subsist after the activity has been completed" (28). On his account, instrumentality at first seems to fundamentally separate work activities from labor activities, securing the independence of the manmade world from nature. Work objects "subsist" without the need for constant maintenance, they're presence disrupts the cyclical processes of nature, giving the human world a sense of objective permanence.

Soon after introducing instrumentality, Arendt reveals its fatal side effect. As soon as use-objects are introduced into and become part of the world, they quickly become means for new ends and new objects. The problem of instrumentality is not that work is or will become a sort of laboring, but that instrumentality hinders our ability to adequately *see* the differences between labor and work in experience, as doers and spectators of either. Work *becomes described* as a sort of laboring. As our capacity to transform the natural world has increased, people have begun to live most of their lives in a fabricated world. Thus, an experience of natural labor has been replaced with a fabricated labor. For example, we do the work jobs demand not necessarily to introduce new things into the world, but as a means to exist in society. As Markell puts it, this fabricated labor infuses work "with a vicious circularity that mimics the natural circularity of biological life" (28). So, work's fundamental distinction from labor imperils it: It becomes experienced just as we would natural labor. Except now, our labors do not relate us to but further

alienate us from the Earth.³ At the same time, the world loses its sense of permanence and objectivity: objects are not made to last, but to be worn down, to make way for other objects. The danger is a loss of the locating power of the world, its ability to “relate and separate” and thus give rise to the public realm.⁴ So the territorial distinction between labor and work also imperils the possibility of action.

Markell frames Arendt’s injection of works of art into the world of use objects as a sort of “relational” remedy. Among manmade objects, works of art have a singular ability to re-describe and reaffirm the distinctiveness of work, free from their self-defeating instrumental character. The work of art’s ambiguous location among activities allows Arendt to disentangle work from labor, securing Arendt’s theoretical picture. At the same, her discussion implies that activities where we engage with art works provide a practical way to combat the corrosive effects of instrumentality.

Markell first notices this ambiguous location at the level of style. What marks “The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art” from the previous five chapters in the “Work” section is that it “strains towards the vocabulary of the ‘Action’ [section]” (27). For Markell, its central moves “anticipate the language of layering and intertwining” (32). that will come to

³ For Arendt, the consequences of this alienation are immense, for “The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice” (2). To forget our relationship to the Earth does not only mean to forget our mortality, but the essential root of our *natality*: “without the articulation of natalty, we would be doomed to swing forever in the ever-recurring cycle of becoming, then without the faculty to undo what we have done and to control at least partially the processes we have let loose, we would be the victims of an automatic necessity bearing all the marks of the inexorable laws which, according to the natural sciences before our time, were supposed to constitute the outstanding characteristic of natural processes” (246).

⁴ Arendt describes this sudden loss through analogy: “What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible” (53).

describe action. by edging into the sort of vocabulary that will describe the distinct activity of acting, the section “performs the very intertwining it describes” (32). While his essay lacks particular examples of this intertwining vocabulary, Markell sees a theoretical bridge between works of art and action. Public appearance rather than use or exchange value is essential to the enactment both of art works and actions. In one sense, this seems to distinguish the fabrication of art works territorially from the fabrication of use and exchange objects, bringing the work of art closer to the higher realm of action. However, the distinction of artworks from use-objects conflicts with a sentence in Chapter 23 that, for Markell, acts as the pivot of the entire book: “To be sure, an ordinary use object is not and should not be intended to be beautiful; yet whatever has a shape at all and is seen cannot help being either beautiful or ugly, or something in-between” (HC 172-173). Markell takes this sentence to show that “the idea of the “work of art” has ceased to represent a discrete domain of aesthetically significant objects, and has become nothing more than a vivid exemplification of a phenomenon (indeed, of a phenomenality). that pervades the world of ordinary use-objects too” (35). For Markell, lack of use and exchange values *does* distinguish the work of art from other objects, but the pivotal sentence recasts that distinction as relational. Uselessness opposes use, not by drawing a dividing line, but rather by drawing us to a certain distance away from other objects in the world, so that we may see them in a new light. In his concluding remarks, Markell points to an overall practical conclusion we can derive from this shift in work’s distinction:

Arendt is saying something stronger than this: that the instrumental purpose of a course of activity—its use, you might say—is, when properly understood, never *merely* instrumental, but implicates larger questions about, as Arendt would later say, “how [the world] is to look” and “what kind of things are to appear in it” (Arendt 2006, 220 [223]). Action emerges when we confront and are provoked into speech and deed by these larger questions as they present themselves in some “worldly, objective reality” (1958, 182).

A practice of considering “how the world is supposed to look” begins by noticing what it looks like. We can begin this practice when we engage with works of art, because their fragile and sensible, rather than instrumental nature, disposes them for judgments which because of our taste we cannot help but have. Having turned our eyes to these exceptional objects, we may turn back to the rest of the world of things and ask similar questions with a similar sensitivity. That is, if we can see objects apart from their instrumentality, perhaps we can see instrumentality as a similarly malleable thing. Just as Chapter 23 takes us from “Work” to “Action” through the work of art, the work we do when we engage with artworks leads us from the world into the web of human relationship, the public realm of speech and action, that may change world it forms around for the better. For Markell, the book *performs* this entrance into action through its organizational structure, by contrasting two opposed ways of distinction, each allowing for the meaning of the other to open forth to us.

I have tried my best to give full account of Markell’s interpretation. The intertwining opposition between territorial and relational distinctions generates a theoretical picture of Arendt’s thinking that incorporates, rather than ignores, the book’s twists and turns. In one sense this picture reflects the very public realm Arendt describes. Markell’s interpretation tells us that the book’s many subjects—location, activity, space, etc. are fundamentally connected through a plurality of perspectives that see those subjects in different ways. These subjects “relate and separate” the perspectives that gather around them, just as objects in the world around which we gather “relate and separate” us, preventing us from “falling over each other, so to speak” (HC 52). In framing the book this way, Markell shows a way in which *The Human Condition* not only means to explain a worldview to the reader, but to act as an example of how to take into account

many ways of seeing. With this in mind, I would like to account for another way of seeing that I think is essential to the text, and that from its theoretical vantage point, Markell's essay does not see.

II. Performance

On Markell's account, *The Human Condition's* stylistic and structural features *perform* Arendt's theory. He uses the notion of performance frequently in his essay. He describes Arendt's two senses of work as an attempt to "reintegrate human activity understood instrumentally and human activity understood as meaningful performance." (PM 19). He speaks of performance in another way to describe Arendt's own work. "Formally," that is to say in appearance "work seems to be the concept with the closest connection to Arendt's own theoretical activity: as a boundary-setter and wall-builder, Arendt herself performs something analogous to what *homo faber* performs with stone and wood" (23). He also describes the structural function of Arendt's concepts as performative: A reliance on territorial distinctions makes "it difficult for work to perform the structural task Arendt had set for it" (28). Yet again, he refers to performance in characterizing Chapter 23, which "with respect to the structure of *The Human Condition* as a written work...*performs* the intertwining it describes" (32). In these four instances, Markell uses performance in four completely different ways. In the first instance, work is a performance that makes meaning *appear*. In the second, Arendt's theoretical activity performs in the sense that it *looks like* the activity of a worker—not an artist but a "boundary setter" In the third, the concept of work cannot *perform* a task *properly*. Finally chapter 23 textually "*performs*" the theoretical intertwining of Action and Work.

Markell's essay attempts to draw symmetries between the book's stylistic (e.g. fourth instance). and structural (e.g. third instance). features and its theoretical concerns (e.g. first and second instances). Performance keeps coming up to describe what these features are doing—yet there is no indication of what unifies them. Because of this, the meaning of the term conflicts across the levels of the book that he wants to intertwine. Is performance the performance of a task, or a performance that makes something appear? If Arendt's theoretical activity performs *like a worker*, is it because Arendt works, or because she's trying to show what work is. If she is trying to *show* what work is, then is this show meant to perform one of the book's rhetorical or structural tasks? If so, then isn't this meaningful, communicative, performance not made to show itself, but to be an instrument holding together the larger structure of the book? If so, then Arendt's representation of a meaningful performance turns out to perform *instrumentally*—precisely a static view of objects that on Markell's account she finds works of art mean to resist and reframe.

I appreciate Markell's method as a way to begin incorporating the book's compositional intricacies into our conception of what Arendt says, and I agree that in style and structure she does in some sense perform what she wants to speak about. Markell makes the mistake of assuming that these performances always serve to elucidate a strictly *theoretical* concern. For his purposes, Markell may not be concerned with the meaning of the word "performance" But a care for the many senses words take is essential to Arendt's methods of inquiry and writing; we have to read her with a similar care. He does not ask what Arendt might think a performance is. This betrays the fact that he does not consider what Arendt might think *theory* is. If we do, we quickly see that his assumption is untenable. In fact, For Arendt performative activity is *literally*

opposed to theoretical activity. His notion of “meaningful performance” describes how works of art define the category of work. Works of Art *perform* by making meaning appear to us—an audience. The most obvious sense of an artwork that performs is a performance; a play; *theater*. Throughout her work, Arendt points out this last word’s shared root with *theory* in ancient Greek *théātron* meant a theater, or gathering place, and takes its root from the verb *theáomai*, meaning to observe, watch, view—to spectate, as *theatai*—spectators—do. The theorist contemplates the world the way a spectator watches a performance; still and from a distance.⁵

In arguing for Chapter 23’s functions and fits into the structure *he* overlays onto the whole book, Markell doesn’t spend enough time working through the ways in which Chapter 23, with its peculiar ideas, style, and its structural position, might *not* relate, nor be supposed to relate, to a theoretical system. If we call Chapter 23 the center of a performance, an enactment of an idea, then we have to say that the chapter does something distinctly *non-theoretical*. This is not to say that Arendt throws theory out, nor that a theoretical vantage gives us wrong answers. In the chapter, Arendt does describe what she thinks works of art are, and where they fit into the world. We should take these descriptions seriously while also keeping in mind that there must be a reason why she couches them in a performance—that is, language that methodically opposes them. We ought to ask how these performances illuminate the work of art in a way that theory couldn’t have. If the chapter’s structural and stylistic features act as *tangible representations* that mimic works of art—then what else could these features be but works of art? If this is the case, we should consider what Arendt meant these performances to do, given an understanding of what Arendt says—from a theoretical view—works of art do and how they appear in the world.

⁵ In the next section, we’ll see an example of this etymological reading in *The Life of the Mind*.

Having said this, some might ask if we really should isolate the chapter from the rest of the book. The performance that takes place in the chapter is not only its own, but part of a larger body of work. Such a performance could still be part of theoretical structure of the book, because not the chapter, but the theory as a whole is the final product of Arendt's work. Because Arendt's whole theoretical picture includes a performative element, than those features can have both a structural function *and* reflect the entire book, not just a single chapter, as itself a work of art. On this view, the basic premises of Markell's argument still stand. There is no Chapter 23 without the rest of *The Human Condition*. The converse also works if we say with Markell that Chapter 23 acts as the keystone or turning point of the entire book. Like the composition of a painting, the book as a whole frame and the chapter as a focal element are intertwined and self-contained.

As we saw earlier, Markell's account relates two parallel senses of structure: theoretical and textual. For him, Arendt's theoretical picture is formed concentrically out from its center: the *work of art* helps maintain the distinctiveness of *work*, the category of activities that mediates the *labor-work-action* triad that make up our common human capacities. Arendt "performs" this theoretical hierarchy *textually* by organizing the book's contents concentrically: The three sections dealing with the triad make up the middle three of five sections; the "Work" section makes up the middle of those section; while Chapter 23 is the middle chapter of the book, and lies between the "Work" and "Action" sections. We can agree that Chapter 23 reframes the category of work by introducing a class of objects (art works). that are useless and only meant to appear. But Markell doesn't consider the reasons why, for Arendt, this distinct type of appearance can have any effect on human experience at all. Arendt tells us quite explicitly: "The immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought" (HC 168). If we are to understand what

art works do, and where they fit into the world, we must understand their relationship to thinking.

Markell's essay entirely ignores this relationship. We could try to picture the "capacity for thought" as the next concentric layer within works of art. But if we do so, the scheme quickly degrades. At the very center of the labor-work-action triad is an activity that *none* of its activities relate to: thought is a mental activity, and does not even take place in the same realm (that is, physical space). as the other activities. Further, for Arendt thought is not even strictly involved in the fabrication of works of art. She writes: "The thought process by itself no more produces and fabricates tangible things, such as books, paintings, sculptures, or compositions, than usage by itself produces and fabricates houses and furniture" (169). Finally, we already know that Arendt "systematically" omitted thought from her considerations, limiting them to labor, work, and action.

Chapter 23 and the work of art—stand apart from the world of the human condition, like conspicuous strangers in the text. However, Chapter 23 does lie at the center of the text, and at the center of Arendt's systematically organized considerations. The position of this stranger point to its significance—perhaps not as a key structural moment in a theory about the world, but as a moment in a story about this position, that is, about thought's relationship to works of art as it manifests there. The story of thinking in *The Human Condition* begins with a call to it in the prologue; then a systematic omission of it from discussion; then in Chapter 23, its puzzling reappearance for a few brief pages in the very middle of the system that it was excluded from; then another recession from view, and finally, its return and release in the reaffirmation of the book's initial proposition that we should think what we are doing.

With this said, we still need to ask how Arendt performs the relationship between thought and the work of art, and why a purely theoretical treatment of this relationship could not suffice. Why must the work of art be enacted to be understood? To answer this, we need to understand how, for Arendt, the work of art and thought become close, and why neither of them can be grasped from a theoretical perspective. In the next section we will see that the thought communicates itself into the world through metaphorical language, and how this communication stands apart from theoretical language.

III. Metaphor and thinking what we are doing

*How Ludicrous these efforts to translate
 Into one's private tongue a public fate!
 Instead of poetry divinely terse,
 Disjointed notes, Insomnia's mean verse!*

-John Shade, *Pale Fire* (231-234).
 (a.k.a Vladimir Nabokov).

Chapter 23 describes the work of art through a performance that tangibly expresses, or “reifies,” what it attributes to the work of art. This union of form and content can only mean that Chapter 23 is itself a work of art. Understanding this, we ought to reconsider how we can and cannot speak about the chapter. How we speak about the chapter will determine how we can see it. Because the chapter speaks about the work of art, it speaks to what it itself is doing and can do. This reflexive position has two implications. First, as a work of art, the chapter speaks to us by appearing—not by accurately or explicitly stating what works of art are, or what it is; but rather through the sheer composition of its words and phrases, making its meaning communicable to us. What this composition says by appearing is not yet either true or untrue—it simply is there—and we’re here, looking at it. Secondly, like all works of art, the chapter shows

its immediate source in thought. Artworks rarely have thought as their subject. Rather, for Arendt the final product points out, in an unspoken way, the path it took from the mind of the artist out into appearance. Among artworks then, Chapter 23's subject is peculiar. It is *about* the work of art and its journey from thought. As such thought appears twice and intertwined: written about as an explicit part of chapter's subject, and emergent in the chapter itself as an object.

This may opens up a question of priority: which came first, the theory of the work of art or the performance? I think we should refrain from this line of questioning. Not because there isn't an answer, but because the answer is not the point. What matters is how Chapter 23, *this thing*, appears. We have to ask how it appears to see how it shows Arendt's thinking. This means moving away from asking *for what purpose* Arendt made it appear, why it's true, and how to fit it into what we know. These questions may have answers, and may lead to fruitful judgments. But we ask them from the perspective of a theorist, I hope to show another way to approach our reading, one which abstains from questions of theory, so we can give the text some independence. By independence, I mean a recognition of what is un-relatable in the text, or rather, only relates to itself. Why we should abstain from these questions will only become apparent after we begin to do so. abstaining from questions of theory requires a suspension of disbelief—or, in positive terms, it requires trust. After a sketch of this way of reading, I would like to look at some evidence from *The Life of the Mind*, where she points to the possibilities and limits of this sort of reading.

For the moment, all we know is that Arendt wrote this chapter and gave it to us to read. If she meant it to be a work of art—and that would mean a work of art as she describes such—then we should listen to her when she writes that "Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency...until [it is] fit to enter the world and to be transformed into

things, to become reified" (HC 168). The heart of this chapter is not a torsional bridge between opposed methods; it's a feeling—a "passionate intensity" that *may* have once swirled about Arendt's inner life. What is this feeling? I don't know, we cannot know. This does not mean it does not live in the text. Feeling is mute, inarticulate, and despondent. Arendt's words tell us that feeling is irrelevant to the world because it cannot convey itself into appearance. What can be conveyed is a story, implicit or explicit, of what one thought when they found themselves feeling. This story only promises that there once was a feeling, and the promise is fulfilled when we who receive the story choose to trust it.

So as we read this chapter, we have to understand that its root feeling is hidden and was not meant to be pried out. Read from this perspective, we see that the chapter requires us to take part in its enactment. In charging us with this role, Arendt opposes her readers to the perspective of the theorist. If only for a moment, we are asked to act with the text. Arendt points to this opposition explicitly in the chapter "Thinking and doing: the spectator" in *The Life of the Mind*, where she writes that as a spectator, "you may understand the truth of what the spectacle is about; but the price you have to pay is withdrawal from participating in it" (LM 93). This late book sought to reconsider three mental activities in three parts: "Thinking," "Willing," and the unwritten "Judging." For Arendt, these activities have in common a "peculiar *quiet*, absence of any doing or disturbances, the withdrawal from involvement [and partiality.]" (92). Arendt asks after the "region of withdrawal" particular to each mental activity. Arendt uses the term withdrawal to call to a movement of attention from the common world of appearance, if only temporarily, toward a private one. Considering these regions is essential for her, because they are the places from which, after having thought, willed, or judged, we return to the world.

Arendt traces the activity of spectating from its roots in Greek culture, from Pythagoras to Plato and Aristotle, to its importance in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Historically, spectating is often described as representative of the opposition between thinker and actor. However, Arendt notes that this scission has roots in a much more particular situation. As was mentioned earlier, our word *theory* comes from the greek word for spectators, *theatai*, which also gives us *theater*. As Arendt has it, the opposition of spectator and playactor does not describe an opposition between thinker and actor, but between actor and judge.

Where "the spectator occupies a position that enables him to see the whole play-as the philosopher is able to see the *kosmos* as a harmonious ordered whole The actor, being part of the whole, must *enact* his part in it...he is bound to the particular that finds its ultimate meaning and the justification of its existence solely as a constituent of a whole" (LM 94-95).

Just as the theatergoer's position allows him to see the "meaning of the whole play," the judge, or theorist, withdraws to the impartial position required to make fair judgements of a situation or spectacle, and the actors taking part in it. But in this position the "price you have to pay" is separation from the "harmonious ordered whole" that you can see. This also means that you give up the experience of being a part; of being bound, of searching for meaning, and of striving to make an appearance. Judgement's region of withdrawal "is clearly located within our ordinary world" (LM 97)., but situated at that world's edges, where we watch its spectacle proceed. However, the locality of where we withdraw when we are willing or thinking is far more obscure. The problem is that these activities are not occupied by what has appeared, but to what hasn't, "such everyday thought-things as justice, liberty or courage, that are nevertheless totally outside sense experience" (LM 97). The objects of thinking are the invisible "thought-things" that we may imagine, point out in visible things, but can never reliably see.

With this term, we can see a path back to Chapter 23, where Arendt tells us that “Works of art are thought-things, but this does not prevent their being things” (HC 168-169). Not only works of art, but works of philosophy are thought-things. In the *Life of the Mind*, Arendt tells us that we “sense” thought-things through our mental capacities. They are invisible, imaginary, or otherwise hoped-for things at we “see” with our mind’s eye.⁶ among objects, works of art seem to have a dual location. They are tangible objects, related to us through our eyes and ears. Nonetheless, their forms reach into and signify the intangible. For Arendt, this reciprocal communication occurs because all thought-things are formed by and couched in metaphorical language.

Arendt tells us that “metaphor achieves the “carrying over” -*metapherein*- of a genuine and seemingly impossible *metabasis eis allo genos*, the transition from one existential state, that of thinking, to another, that of being an appearance among appearances and this can be done only by *analogies*” (LM 103). Just as the term “theory” has roots in the image of a spectator watching a play, the term “metaphor” has roots in the task of carrying something across a distance. Both terms convey the inwardly-sensed experience of a mental activity, through the analogy of an everyday activity.

“Theory” and “Metaphor” are philosophical terms and for Arendt all such terms are already essentially metaphorical. A term’s metaphorical meaning “discloses itself when we dissolve it into its original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the first philosopher to use it” (103). This is an example of where Arendt distinguishes between the search for meaning and the search for truth. The philosopher uses language to give an account of

⁶ c.f. Chapter 13 of *Thinking* “Metaphor and the Ineffable” Arendt tells us that “All mental activities, driven to language as the only medium for their manifestation, each draw their metaphors from a different bodily sense....from the outset of formal philosophy, thinking has been thought of in terms of *seeing*...” (LM 110). Willing has traditionally been associated with *hearing*, and judgment with *tasting*.

a general truth apprehended in his or her own thinking. The only reason that the philosopher's language smacks of the truth—can be shared and spoken about—is that it has meaning to others. Standing apart from the idea, this meaning relates the inner experience of sensing the idea through an analogous everyday or sense experience—an everyday that all people, no matter how lost in thought, originate from and share in.

This meaning can only “disclose itself” when “we” readers, viewers, spectators, thinkers, “dissolve” the term into its original context. This is an assertion of method. We understand the meaning of a term when we imagine what it was like to engage in an activity; for example of sitting in the quiet rows of an amphitheater. That is to say, when we think what the philosopher was doing. This tangible thing must have been “vividly” in the mind of the philosopher. Vivid, because when the philosopher used the term, he or she wasn't watching a spectacle or carrying a sack, but was writing or speaking, to himself or herself, or to a friend. Excited by the wild inner movement of thought, but lost for words, the philosopher surrendered to simile, a ‘sort-of-like,’ and remembered something—something everyday, memorable, and yet gleaming now with a new glow. So, to “dissolve” a term into its context, doubly means to imagine what it was like for the philosopher to have remembered and rediscovered something in a new way—and then, of course to have shared it.

The experience of thought is the need for communicability, what Arendt calls, an “urge to speak,” to release ideas from the overlapping, unending circularity of thought and feeling—of a soul (*psyche*). that feels, and a mind (*nous*). that thinks. We can understand this urge to appearance as a desire to enact what we feel present inwardly yet outwardly absent. Following Arendt, this desire, commonly shared yet felt individually, is simply the desire for our thought's be a part of the world by *making sense* in it.

Having thought through all of this, perhaps we ought not to make a hard distinction between how the thinker and theorist each read; the regions that each withdraws to may not be mutually exclusive. The theorist made a choice to withdraw into impartiality and “paid the price” of renouncing action in the world. But the theorist never actually leaves the world, he or she only stands at its edges, related to it by a line of sight. Couldn’t we imagine that, from this withdrawn location, the theorist might withdraw still further into the region of thought? That is, might he or she think what they are doing? Feel and wonder about the choice they have made? That is, might they think, or imagine, what it would be like to be a part of spectacle?

IV. The work of art and transfiguration

Chapter 23 begins with a discussion of works of art and their outstanding permanence in the world of things. Arendt describes a series of “transformations” that lead to a work of art. This series falls into the basic scheme by which all objects are made: A human capacity, for thought, usage, or “trucking and bartering” (exchanging,). transforms a “passionate intensity” into an idea that may enter the world by way of actual workmanship. Likewise, thought transforms inner feeling into a shape fit for the world, and hands this shape, this mental sketch, into an artist’s craftsmanship. Unlike the human capacities for exchanging and using, thinking, which is for Arendt “immediate source” of art works, does not act in the world. Thought, intangible and invisible, can never itself appear. Somehow through the artist’s fabrication invisible thought *does* manifest in the world—But how does something invisible *actually* become visible? What does thought *look* like?

Arendt distinguishes the process of reification that leads to an art work as not only a transformation of materials but a “transfiguration” I will try to show that this small semantic distinction illustrates the distinctly metaphorical existence of works of art. That is, its existence as both thing and thought-thing, communicating the inner experiences of the mind into the world of appearances. Arendt uses “Transfiguration” as a metaphor to describe the inner experience we feel when we witness this seemingly impossible communication. But if we follow what Arendt did with *theory* and *metaphor* and “dissolve” *transfiguration* “into its original context”, we won’t find an everyday activity at all, but instead something miraculous.

Arendt first describes transfiguration as “a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames” (168). This mysterious image alludes to Rilke’s poem *Magie*. Though Arendt describes the distinctiveness of artistic reification through the image, from a purely theoretical perspective the phrase alone tells us very little, and Arendt does not explain how the image corresponds to reality. We should consider how the silence surrounding the image relates to the imagery itself. The image does not correspond to reality, in the same way that dust bursting into flame does not correspond to anything *real*—it corresponds only to what is unreal, impossible, but nonetheless imaginable and speakable. As much as we might want, nature’s processes cannot be reverted, time cannot turn backwards, and life cannot spring from death. But when these reversals are rendered in words or images that can then be remembered and pictured in our minds, it is “as though,” at least in some realm, they were possible.

Beginning with thought and ending in workmanship, the reification of works of art gives shape to our inward and intertwined highest hopes and deepest despairs, not so they can be

fulfilled or dispelled—works of art cannot reliably do that—but so that they may be seen and shared in beautiful things. Previously we saw that artworks allow, if not a total escape, an alternative to an “instrumental” definition of manmade objects. Now we see that their inherent publicity allows for an alternative way of approaching our invisible thoughts and uncontrollable feelings.

In common usage, the differences between the words *transformation* and *transfiguration* are slight in sound and meaning. Both words refer to a change in form, and a “metamorphosis” But if we consider the original meaning of *transfiguration* we’ll see it both reflects and clarifies what Arendt means by the term. A transformation turns one thing into another by fundamentally altering its form, shape, character, condition, function, or nature.⁷ A thing is altered to become something else, to be given a different name. For Arendt, the worker transforms raw material into an artificial form. This transformation implies an unavoidable violence upon (135). nature, which is destroyed in conversion to something new and valuable. On the other hand, transfiguration seems a much softer change. In transfiguration, a thing’s original material remains through to the end; somehow what has changed is only its appearance.⁸

Transfiguration has roots in the miraculous. The particular miracle, Jesus’ Transfiguration on the Mountain from Matthew:17, serves as a wonderfully illuminating allegory—albeit I have no idea if it is explicitly related—to Arendt’s use of the word in Chapter 23. The story professes the most intense revelation— divinity showing and announcing itself on Earth. But the moment is fleeting and its audience is intimate. Fleeting, so that as soon as one turned away, it was as

⁷"transformation, n" OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. April 2017.

⁸ ⁸ "transfiguration, n" OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. April 2017.

though nothing had ever changed. Did anything change? Nothing but the eyes and ears of a small group of witnesses stirred to an appearance arising and disappearing out from nowhere. The passage, quoted from *The Authorized Kings James Version*, reads as follows:

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, 2 and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. 3 And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. 4 Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. 5 While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. 6 And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. 7 And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. 8 And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only. 9 And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.

The passage tells us that transfiguration is not a change of material but of transparency: “his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light” Like light, which is of all things, most invisible, intangible, and clarifying. This could only have been said in simile (“as the light”). because it could not be said what this shining white really was. It was not as the way things are; though it did become clear in the way that things appear. What was invisible within Jesus became apparent on his body. His skin remains skin and his clothes remain clothes but both are now seen and described different way. The transparency of transfiguration allows for an object’s intangible qualities to be introduced onto its tangible qualities, so that even if a thing may appear opaque, its opaqueness is given qualities of translucency. In this way, we can describe transfiguration as a movement outwards from the unknown heart of something onto its visible surface. The Transfiguration was a fleeting sight, yet it showed a beauty that was always within Jesus and would remain afterwards. Having shimmered into view, it could now rest in

the memory of others. From that new place it has been evidently been reimagined, and put down in words.

Remembrance implies a responsibility to remember well. What was shown was untouchable and touched nothing. To remember that requires a particular way or practice of remembering. In Mathew 18:9, Christ charges his apostles to secrecy: “tell the vision to no man, until the Son of Man be risen again from the dead” That is: Do not put what you saw to use, not even to stop my death. The mystery that transfiguration reveals must remain a mystery even when it is given a form as clear as day. To contrive transfiguration would be to transform it into something it is not, in effect forgetting what it really was. Transfiguration creates nothing, does nothing, and explains nothing of what nevertheless shines through it. At the same time, this intangibility, this thing-less-ness, is what let the transfiguration occur, because it was what journeyed out into appearance. The mystery conveyed in transfiguration, the least thing-like thing, is fragile and must be cared, maintained as a mystery.

Transfiguration is the communication of the intangible into the tangible, the permanent into the fleeting and fragile—a communication that implies and illuminates a responsibility to the unknown. In chapter 23, Arendt tells us that through works of art the “very stability of the human artifice” becomes apparent. This stability is a thought-thing, and does not normally appear in the world of things, “which being inhabited and used by mortals can never be absolute” (HC 168). What we do in and with the world changes how we can see it. Because almost all things we make get used up, our awareness and belief in this stability is subject to change and loss. But works of art demand a different sort engagement, and so allow worldly stability to achieve “a representation of its own” (168). In this way, works of art do something miraculous,

and strange to the world of things. If we remember the representation that world stability achieved in useless things, we may remind ourselves of its unchanging possibility elsewhere.

The language of inner light attached to the root of transfiguration comes through in the metaphorical imagery Arendt brings into Chapter 23. Before she introduces the word transfiguration, she hints at it in a metaphor: “it is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of the Art” (168). In one sense, “becomes transparent” is just a figure of speech—art’s permanence makes the fact of worldly stability understandable. But if we try to take the statement literally, it collapses in an illuminating way. “Worldly stability” is an idea, a sense of reality that seldom lasts in us, as we watch the world of things succumb to unending natural processes. But because we don’t use artworks (because they are useless), and instead preserve them to be seen—they maintain the possibility to give us this a sense of reality. Their exterior qualities—how they interact with the world—lead to changes in how we can think about that world. These changes only occur because an intangible thought became tangible in the physical qualities of an object. What “becomes transparent” becomes part of a two way communication between inside and out. By using words of physical change to describe this communication, Arendt positions her language in the very in-between that they describe. Their permanence makes artworks stand out from all other human made objects. Yet that same permanence provides artworks’ return to its place among these use-objects, because through it shines the worldly stability hidden within things more quickly consumed. though this light emanates from within the work of art, it does not only shine on them, but through them may show the though hidden meaning within all other manmade things.

In this transparency “a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present” (168)., Not worldly immortality itself, but a *premonition* of it becomes “tangibly present” So, what becomes tangible is a communication of something not yet tangible. This foretold immortality is itself said to be made possible through human workmanship. How are we to understand *premonition*? Does Arendt mean it as a sort of gut-feeling? a sense of self-assurance or a hope that some immortality is achievable? This is possible, but we have to consider that this premonition appears outside of the individual— and in transparency, is allowed to “shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read” From this, we might say that the premonition is a relation made in the reciprocity of author and audience.

V. *Poetry and Thinking*

*Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die, Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence, Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese Jar still
moves perpetually in its stillness.*

-T.S Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Works of art stand out from other objects because they show thought as the source of their inspiration; among these, poetry stands furthest out from the rest of the world of things and is thus the “most human and least worldly of all the arts” (169). Most human, because it the medium “in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it” (169). Poetry’s near-intangibility brings it closest to a visible representation of invisible human thought. However, Arendt describes poetry’s “closeness” as not just determined by resemblance, but as

peculiar kind of *distance*, “as it were,” travelled between thought’s original home in the heart or the head of man and its eventual destination in the world...” (169). Not just poetry, but all artworks have some sort of location between their “original home” and the world. Where are these locations and across what distance do they stretch? Before we ask such a literal question of this figure of speech we should note that Arendt’s basic answer is simply that the more “reification and workmanship” an artwork demands, the more the more “worldly” it is. The relative “location” of an object is determined by the amount of physical force needed to turn an idea for an object into an object.

This answers one side of the question—that is, how Arendt distinguishes between art works as they manifest in the world. While this tells why some art works are more worldly than others, it begs the question why a lack of physical exertion makes an art work *more human*. The more human an art-form is, the more its end-product will resemble the thought process itself, and as such will shine a brighter light on thinking. But a poem is still an thing among things in the world. how does a poems inherent lack of workmanship allow it to reach back and reflect thinking more immediately than other kinds of art works? Once again that other distance stretches out before us: between the world and our minds. This ‘human distance’ is less measurable than an object’s ‘worldly distance,’ because it is not determined by an object’s objectivity, but its *absence* of objectivity.

To the extent that they do, poetry and philosophy convey thinking into the world through metaphorical language. In Chapter 23, Arendt does not yet mention this relationship, however, she does describe poetry in conspicuously metaphorical terms. In a sense, she describes poetry through poetry’s language. Arendt’s description pictures something that seems close to what

actually happens when a poem is made, as well as how a poem objective attributes relate to other objects in the world. However, her metaphorical language simultaneously expresses poetry's peculiar absence of objectivity. By yielding to metaphor and simile to describe poetry's physical attributes, she shows that its placement among objects seems to strain the definition of physical objectivity. In showing this strain, she shows, not just theoretically but poetically, poetry's closeness to thought and its fey existence in the world.

Arendt gives the physical existence of all works of art the same attributes as the other objects they stand out among. They have materials—paint, ink, stone—that have a certain durability—a lifespan that can be affected by the physical talents and implements that went into their making. Music and poetry are “the least ‘materialistic’ of the arts because their ‘material’ consists of sounds and words” (169). This gives us one sense of poetry's near-intangibility, though sounds and words are physical phenomena. Poetry's “material is language,” (169). and language, at least the western languages Arendt is thinking of, simply cannot be touched. Not spoken language, which disappears into silence almost as soon as we say it, and not written language, where script signifies the sounds of words and meanings to which they only arbitrarily correspond.

For Arendt, a poem's durability is not archival ink, but its particular sort of *memorability*. Memorability is the product of the poem's “condensation” of language, which “directly transforms” remembrance into memory. Remembrance here is that collection of feelings senses and associations a poet, (and all of us are sometimes poets) brings to his words; his personal sense of the world. This collection is made into memory by means of rhythm, “through which the

poem becomes fixed in memory itself" (169). Namely, in us, the readers, in our memory and then in our thought.

Arendt is clearly neither using 'material' or durability here in the same way as she does with other kinds of objects and art works. Poetry's "material is language" insofar as a poet uses words like a bricklayer uses bricks. But words—sometimes spoken, written, or thought—are not a definite material the way bricks are. I dare you to think a brick. Words move us, they carry in sound a notion that they are not. Good quality mortar will hold a brick wall up longer, sort of like how good rhythm stitches stanzas into the back of your mind and keeps their feeling in your heart. But the location of this wall is much discernible than the location of the back of your mind and the bottom of your heart. And you can't buy rhythm at a store.

All this is to say that when Arendt talks about the material and durability of poetry by ostensibly as she is placing among other objects, she is expressing its displacement it from the world, and doing so through the very metaphorical language that conveys poetry into the world. In doing so, she tells us that every attempt to define poetry only shows its indefinability. When we read a poem, think about poetry, say something about it, we should always keep in mind the question: "what is poetry?" and keep it unanswerable. This distinct unanswerability stems from poetry's intangible closeness to thought, and allows poems—if we let them—to show us that closeness. The intangibility of poetry's place in the world underscores its particular fragility. On its own, poetry not only lives in remembrance, but relies upon our *willingness* to remember and to remember *well*.

So far, I have tried to show that for Arendt, thought can appear through metaphorical language, and have tried to show that she does precisely this through her use of metaphor in

Chapter 23. Because her own writing on thinking uses metaphorical language, that writing itself shows its source in her thinking. Having said this, I want to emphasize that the presence of poetic and metaphorical language does not tell us what Arendt's thought process actually *was*, nor does it mean we should look to define her thought process outside of the words through which Arendt tried to make her thought appear. Our interest can only be in the fact that these thoughts appear at all. A thought's appearance in words is necessarily separate from that thought's original existence in the mind. The distance across which words point to their origin, is the same distance that allows thought as it appears in the world, to enter into our minds. Arendt describes what it means bridging that distance, that is, *remembering well*, in metaphor:

"It is always the "dead letter" in which the "living spirit" must survive, a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again" (169).

Who is this willing life, and what does it mean "rescue" the living spirit out from dead letters? Why is this a sacrifice, and why is it worth taking? In the next section, I will ask these sections by looking at how Arendt described one individual that was exceptionally willing to take the risk to find living meaning in things, all types of things, left for dead.

VI. A Poetic Thinker

*We Could no longer clearly make out the oriels and columns,
and light had entered the façades. Whether owing
to the muslin curtains, the curtain liners,
or the gas mantles beneath the hanging lamps
—this light betrayed little of the illuminated room.
It was concerned only with itself.*

-Walter Benjamin, "Winter Evening"
Berlin Childhood Circa 1900
(trans. Carl Skoggard)

To find a way to consider how Arendt makes thought appear through metaphorical language—without deferring to psychoanalytical interpretation—I will look to a text in which Arendt asks how another writer made his thought appear in the world in her essay “Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940,”⁹ a profile of Walter Benjamin’s intellectual life and afterlife. Arendt ponders the enduring obscurity of Benjamin’s identity; in the modern intellectual society where he lived and worked, in the “dark times” of his persecution and suicide, and even in the blinding light of his post-humous fame. For Arendt, this obscurity stems from his resistance, in word and deed, to the binding rule of society, that “no society can properly function without classification, without an arrangement of things and men in classes and prescribed types” (ILL 3). The problem Benjamin poses is that he was unique, *everything* he wrote “always turned out to be *sui generis*”(3). Arendt has no choice but to place him among unclassifiables. Her profile is an exercise in trying to describe the unclassifiable. The text asks, how can we think about what such person did or do without classifying them?

⁹ Originally published in 1968, for *The New Yorker* and as an introduction to *Illuminations*, a collection of Benjamin’s essays and reflections, edited by Hannah Arendt.

Of course Arendt begins to answer with something like a classification: "I shall try to show that he thought poetically, but he was neither a poet nor a philosopher" (4). How Benjamin thought poetically, how he was a poetic thinker, is the guiding theme of the profile. I will consider the meaning of Arendt's gesture: What does she mean by giving a title to someone whom she only just said evades all titles? What does the term "poetic thinking" do?

In the simplest sense, Benjamin was a poetic thinker because he wrote about poetry. But Arendt does not use the term this way. We can presume that Arendt means "poetic" and "thinker" in the very particular senses she gives to those words. As we have seen, these are Arendtian terms, tightly intertwined throughout her work. On her account, works of poetry are closest to thought, because their material (language) most resembles the speech we hear in our heads as we think. When he thinks, the thinker withdraws from the world and turns towards the inner movements of his mind, only to return, conveying those movements back into the world by way of metaphorical language. If Arendt sees Benjamin as a thinker, it is because he made this return and in his way appears in the world *as* a thinker. Insofar as his thought appears, it appears like poetry. As we saw in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt considers all philosophical and most poetic language to be metaphorical. Yet here she says that Benjamin was "neither a poet nor a philosopher," (4). and neither was his writing strictly poetry or philosophy. With all this in mind, Arendt may have meant to speak to how Benjamin's thought appeared in his works, conveyed the very mental experience of poetry's closeness to thought in a way that no works of poetry or philosophy have ever been able to do in the same way.

With this lengthy formulation, I mean to expand the term, not to define it; definition is not Arendt's goal, and it doesn't make any sense to define a "poetic thinking" whose principal

characteristic was resistance to definition. I mean only to give a context in Arendt's work for where the term originates. We will soon see that the term departs from this context, and that making this departure is essential for Arendt's account. Arendt's goal is to "show" poetic thought, because all that such thought does is appear to be seen. At stake for us then is how to notice poetic thinking where it appears, without defining it. Arendt does not tell us how to do this, but her writing does show *her* attempt to notice Benjamin's poetic thought. To the extent that she does this, we can see her writing as an attempt to think poetically on Benjamin's poetic thought. Just as we make what Arendt does in her writing our guide as we think along with her, she looks to what Benjamin did as a guide to think along with him. What Benjamin did through his writing was notice things that to most seemed mute.

The notion that "thought appears" is a metaphor. It conveys the distinct feeling we get when something out in the world suddenly means something—as though it really said something in particular to us. In reality, things do not communicate anything, the world does not speak—it is *silent*. In reality, Benjamin was not a poetic thinker, he was a writer who dealt with literary things. For Arendt, what made Benjamin a remarkable writer was his work's steadfast attention to silence. Near the end of the profile, Arendt pulls a quote from Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" that could "serve as motto for all of Benjamin's literary criticism:" "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (48). Just afterwards Benjamin asks:

"What does a literary work 'say'? What does it communicate? It 'tells' very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information" (ILL 69).

Of course, literature can literally be read and made to say many things. However, here, “those who understand it” allow a literary work to ‘say’ nothing, in the conviction that the essence of a literary work is found in what it did not say; or rather, its essence *was* its simple, reticent objectivity. What Benjamin did in his work was, as Arendt writes, “not to investigate the utilitarian or communicative functions of linguistic creations, but to understand them in their crystallized and thus ultimately fragmented form as intentionless and noncommunicative utterances of a ‘world essence.’”(50). The silent part of a linguistic object is what it shares with the rest of the world, what makes it a thing among things. When we can notice the particular way a literary work shares in that silence, than we hear the world utter through it.

And this takes practice, which Benjamin did by writing—in a sense, by making noise. But his writing was a sort of listening—listening for what was silent in what he wrote, and what he wrote about—always things that sounded and signaled and said. Arendt identifies Benjamin’s practice as a sort of leveling of signification: “he was concerned with the correlation between a street scene, a speculation on the stock exchange, a poem a thought, with the hidden line which held them all together”(ILL 11). Each of these things ‘speaks,’ but that “hidden line” holding them together is silence. If that silence could be ‘heard’ in a book by readers, then they could hear it on a signpost or a storefront. What is this but the very same sort of transfiguration that Arendt attributed to art work in Chapter 23 of *The Human Condition*? Except here heightened, broadened, and enacted. Where the artist transfigures a thought-thing into the appearance of a thing, it as though Benjamin took everyday objects and transfigured their prescribed “utilitarian and communicative functions” into their sheer appearance. In this way, It is as though Benjamin enacts what Arendt foresaw when she wrote: “Everything that is, must appear and nothing can

appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing and being seen" (HC 173). Benjamin let's this transcendent character be seen. In a sense, he noticed the metaphors already out in the world, waiting to be uncovered.

On Arendt's account, what Benjamin's thought shows in practice is the significance of those intangible gaps, the in-between region of things opposed. Benjamin heard sound through an attention to silence, discovered poems in commonplace objects, took the past and made it present, and wrote through quotations. His practice was to understand one thing by taking the perspective of its very opposite. This is precisely what Arendt does by naming him a poetic thinker—a positive formulation of a resiliently negative statement.

Benjamin's poetic thinking did not just appear in his writing, but through his very manners and way of life as they manifested in everyday life. Arendt specifically focuses on the way Benjamin felt the architecture of Paris affected his experience. What I'd like to point out in this part of Arendt's profile, is a transition, almost like a translation, from Benjamin's words towards a particularly Arendtian description of the city—and thus of his words as an expression of that ever-permeating relationship between the private and public realm. As Arendt tells it, though Benjamin eventually came to Paris as a refugee, throughout his life, the city seems to have been the closest place to home for him, if for no other reason than it introduced and encouraged him to *stroll*:

"Its boulevards, Benjamin discovered as early as 1913, are formed by houses which 'do not seem made to be lived in, but are like stone sets for people to walk between' (*Briefe* I, 56).⁷ this city, around which one still can travel in a circle past the old gates, has remained what the cities of the Middle Ages, severely walled off and protected against the outside, once were: an interior, but without the narrowness of medieval streets, a

generously built and planned open-air *intérieur* with the arch of the sky like a majestic ceiling above it...It is the uniform façades, lining the streets like inside walls, that make one feel more physically sheltered in this city than in any other. The arcades which connect the great boulevards and offer protection from inclement weather exerted such an enormous fascination over Benjamin...and these passageways are indeed like a symbol of Paris, because they clearly are inside and outside at the same time and thus represent its true nature in quintessential form. In Paris a stranger feels at home because he can inhabit the city the way he lives in his own four walls. (ILL 20).

Arendt begins with a quote from Benjamin in which he repurposes the city as a framework for taking a walk—"strolling, idling, *flânerie*" (21). Benjamin is a "stranger," yet here he feels at home. Arendt herself describes Paris as though it really were a dwelling. Arendt casts Benjamin's experience of Paris as an indiscernible movement between private and public life—such that each seems to take elements of the other. She finishes the section by putting her description in strictly political, as opposed to poetic terms, as a "paradise, then, of bohemians, and not only of artists and writers but of all those who have gathered about them because they could not be either politically integrated—being homeless or stateless—or socially" (21). A reader more impartial towards Arendt (more than me that is,) might be reasonably skeptical of her interpretation: it would seem to border on an appropriation; her interpretation perhaps reads too closely to her own theoretical work. However, I would argue that these moments of closeness often give Arendt an opportunity to show where she and Benjamin come apart. Though she has in effect situated Benjamin and his spatial experience into her own framework, his presence within it reveals a peculiar outcome: In Paris, one may give up the need to speak to feel themselves in public, and instead may be given to silently watching as one strolls within and without strolling crowds. In other words, the public world of Paris was disposed to qualities of the private world.

In *The Human Condition*, this possibility poses a danger. As Patchen Markell showed us, whether “territorially” or “relationally” related, the public and private realms need to be separated for either to exist. The realm that Arendt identifies between the private and the political is the “social.” The social is a vague sphere of activities that emerged from and predominates modern mass society, as activities of political life—previously the exclusive location of action and speech—begin to take on qualities of private life. For example with the rise of “housekeeping” as a government activity in the form of economic policy. The threat of the social is mass world-alienation, as common people no longer experience politics as a place where their speech and action will be heard and seen by each other. Instead, the political realm becomes experienced as a disembodied organization determining people’s income—that is, their well-being and ultimately their survival in society.

Benjamin’s Paris almost seems like the quintessential expression of the social realm. But rather than as a danger, Arendt casts life in its social sphere as vital, hopeful and homelike. The politically alienated, “stateless or homeless” strangers who sojourn there “gather” around artists and writers. Here again, Arendt returns to a term she often used in *The Human Condition*. But “gathering,” in the earlier text was principally used to describe the central, common activity of the public realm: “Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (57). There is a clear difference between these two senses of gathering. In the public realm, people gather around objects with common names. But the “Bohemians” who fled to anonymity in Paris could only gather around each other, either lacking distinct nationality or otherwise odd and unclassifiable. Yet clearly a

community formed: if only for a moment, perhaps these people made each other feel as though they had a home.

This does not mean that Benjamin's life changed Arendt's perspective on the social, or made less dangerous in her eyes. But by placing him in this framework, that is, *her* framework, Benjamin seems to show a human possibility that she had not foreseen from the theoretical perspective of *The Human Condition*. She sees where their paths of thinking diverge and in some sense shows herself attempting to imagine Benjamin's path. In the profile Arendt makes the remarkably odd statement that Benjamin's strolling "determined the pace of his thinking... perhaps most clearly revealed in the peculiarities of his gait" (21). In the blurry social, Benjamin found a home; not inside, at rest, but outside, strolling about. Strolling it seems, is the external activity that metaphorically describes Benjamin's inner activity. For Arendt—and I do not mean the theorist, but Arendt the thinker and person—this strolling, a activity emerging from the social, gave life to a poetic thinking that Benjamin brought to words. It is a thing, but also an act, a gesture that makes a thinking "tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read" (HC 167).

Walter Benjamin, in word and in manner—that is, in his vivid appearance—enters, but does not exactly fit into Arendt's theoretical picture. Instead, he seems to crack, strain and break that picture and in this way shows something new in it. By allowing these cracks to show, she shows the *proper* mental response to the rare gift of poetic thinking—welcoming astonishment. To show her astonishment, Arendt enacts an authorial movement from a theoretical perspective into the implicit personal perspective in the world *with*—if only in imagination—an other.

Depart

My hope in these considerations has been to understand what Arendt meant when she asked us “to think what we are doing” (5). Arendt wove this phrase with a dense web of meaning, so that it seems to reach into the poetic. Arendt says it well when she remarks that “it is as though language spoken in utmost density and concentration were poetic in itself” (169). The concentrated meaning of a brief phrase is produced by the writer’s active “condensation” of many meanings into a few words. That concentration gives poetic language its memorability, its ability to turn over and over in the back of our minds long after we’ve put down our books. This companionship can become so strong that the movement of these memorable thought-things becomes ingrained in the very way we think. I have found this to be true of *The Human Condition*’s proposition, which grows and endures in my thoughts. At each moment of thought or feeling that I bring the phrase to, it glints in a new light; and all of these moments becomes brighter for the encounter. I know, finally, that I have simply wanted to share this liveliness with you.

In this pursuit I have tried to take Arendt’s words on their most literal and smallest terms: as an author’s proposition to her readers, of what she would like to do with us as we proceed through the book *with* her. To think what we do, means for us to think what we are doing as we read, and for Arendt to think what she is doing as she writes, and to do this together. On this reading, the proposition may seem impossible: we cannot think *with* Arendt, we can read her work and try to understand it. Other readings (for example, that Arendt was proposing a way to act in the world,) might give us a more practical direction towards understanding her. But I’ve

chosen this reading precisely because of the imaginative leaps it provokes us to take: Can we imagine what its like to think *with* an author? With someone we are far from both in space and time? Can we imagine a way of writing that thinks? Can we imagine a way of reading where we think as Arendt would write? Of course we cannot speak to Arendt through her writing, writing cannot think, and our reading does not write. But if we imagine these impossibilities as possible, then we might notice moments when it is *as though* reading becomes a sort of writing, *as though* writing becomes a sort of thinking, or *as though* Arendt's thoughts met our own through her words. If we take these imaginative leaps, we create metaphorical relationships; the very same relationships that Arendt tells us bridge "the abyss between inward and invisible mental activities and the world of appearances...the greatest gift language could bestow on thinking and hence on philosophy..." (LM 105). This gift is magical, we should treasure it, but also treasure the intangible abyss that it crosses. Metaphorical relationships are, as it were, thought-things; intangible until we put them into words. They're not true, they're not untrue, they do nothing but deepen our capacity to bring meaning into the world and into what we do within it together. In a word, they *transfigure* the world. They do this if we listen and looked for them wherever they might be found, and do this as though it was our very ears that would make them sound and our very eyes that would make them spark. I can only now think to share with you some other words that Hannah Arendt introduced me to:

"When the storyteller is loyal...to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence"

—Isak Dinesen, quoted in *Men in Dark Times*

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